

Narrator: Dena Lewis
Interviewer: Tara Hinton
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Project: Down East Change

Tara Hinton (TH): Okay, cool. So I'll just set that right here. I think it, it'll pick everything up. So, I just usually like to start out by saying the date for the record. So today is, as we've just learned, July 24, 2023. And this is Tara Hinton interviewing Dana Lewis for the Down East Change and Recovery Project. And so, just again, for the record, can you say your full name, and then just will you just tell me a little bit about yourself?

Dena Lewis (DL) [00:36]: I, my name is Dena Rebecca Lewis. I am originally from Harkers Island. We lost a home in Florence. We met—we were blessed to meet the recovery team. And because of that, it was a long process. Oh, my goodness, it was long. But we got there by the grace of God and their hard work, and taking the steps, we were able to completely recover and start again. So it—we initially had to start renting. We rented one place for a while, then the lease was up. So then we went to another place. And during that time, I mean, it was over a year we were waiting. And so but when it was all over, all said and done, they called in their last call, it was Samaritan's Purse, and they—and Long Term Recovery had done everything possible. I mean, they were awesome. They were above and beyond. And so they called in Samaritan's Purse, and Robbie just said, "Well, all you can do is do the work. Put in the time, see where this goes, and pray about it." So that's what we did. We just did the paperwork, put in the time and Long Term Recovery was just awesome every step of the way. And so we prayed about it.

And so now three years forward, we're in a new home and settled. So—now in between that was—our son had a kidney. He lost the kidney, the first kidney, and we were in the middle of the hurricane recovery. So, the home came just in time because he needed a second kidney. And they had said because we were renting and not owning at the time, he couldn't get the kidney until we had a permanent home situation. So at that point, we met Samaritan's Purse, and they said, "Our team is going to meet tonight." And so we were praying really hard, waiting on the kidney, waiting on the home—all the same time. So they called and said, "Hon, we're going to take the project. For one thing, this depends on your son's life, and for another thing y'all have pulled everything out possible, pulled out all the stops. And so we're intervening from this point." And so then, they called about the kidney two days later and said, "Okay, well, you're getting the home. So he's on the list, and his kidney's coming." So everything was, like, happening back to back after a long, literal storm—not just the hurricane—just the whole season was a storm. Then it was suddenly peace after the storm. So it was phenomenal. I mean, looking back now, on the other side, it's like the rainbow after the storm. And so, but we could have never got there without long term recovery, Robbie, and all of them, I can't say enough about them. And they will [pause] fight and do everything they can.

TH [04:03]: Robbie said a lot of amazing things about you too, and about your strength, your incredible strength. And I think one of the things that I was thinking about before our interview was just how—what gave you the

strength to get through all of that, and and what were some of the resources that you wish you would have had that maybe you didn't, despite all that strength during the process?

DL: I think—like said they were great. I think some of the resources was there. It was just a waiting time. And maybe if it had been a little bit more, you know, not stop and go. It might not have backed up the process with my son's kidney. But then also, we wouldn't be where we were now. So either way, I think it just took a lot of faith and hope and patience.

TH [05:13]: Yeah, yeah, and I actually—we'll go back to Florence—but I actually want to back up a little bit and ask you just more about your personal life. Like when you were born just to get the baseline, and about your kids, so we have it all on the record.

DL: Oh, sure. I was born here on Harkers Island. I was—grew up here by Christian parents, raised in church, and when we weren't in church, we were on the boat. And but, by the time I was 18 months old, I was having seizures—like, five and six, and seven, and eight a day. I mean, one after the other until I was 19. And then at 19, they said, "Well, we have pulled all the punches that we know, we're going to send you to the UVA hospital. That's our last call." And they said, "At this point, you might be a candidate for surgery for people with epilepsy." So they sent me there, and they found that I was the prime candidate. So by the time I was 20, going on 21, I was becoming a candidate for the surgery. And then by the time I was 23—they'd said when I was younger, I couldn't have children. Ever. They said it would kill me or induce a seizure.

But by that point, I'd already got my license, which I weren't supposed to have, got a car, had my certification of work with children, and met my husband, was married, and then got pregnant with my daughter. So by the time I brought her home for the hospital, the same day we were signing papers for the adoption of [], and brought my baby girl home as well. So I went from 0 to 60 really, really fast. I was from a young woman starting life to a mother of two. And so that [pause] tells a lot right there. They—my daughter was born deaf. And my son, when I met him, had sensory nerve disorder. He had hearing and vision problems. He was born to his biological mom, because there was some issues, some abuse issues, so he was a pound and two ounces. So he weren't supposed to live. So both of them, fast forward, are miracles now. She's a teacher. She's 22. He's 26. He's studying to be a social worker. And then I have two more. My baby one is 18, he just graduated high school and graduated [] school. And the middle baby is third year in the army. So and my husband he has been just like, a rock through all this. I mean, he's been a trouper—just jumped in there between the storm recovery, illness, daughter got cochlear at one time—Rebecca was at one end of the hospital getting a cochlear implant and David said the other in the hospital waiting for a kidney transplant.

So we had like--We'd only been married a few years. And the doctor come in and said, "Hey, we want—I got a team here wants to meet you guys. So I understand you have only been married a couple years." I'm like, "Yeah." He said, "Well, we're amazed that you got kids at each end of the hospital. And you guys are like taking turns swapping off." [laughter] And he's like, "That's just amazing." And so we're like turning red and we're like, "We're just everyday people." They're like "Yeah, but it takes a trooper, courage, and faith because two special needs, two more in the wings. And we're like, "Well, we're honored you feel that way, but we're just normal people." [laughter] So, it's been quite a journey and he's—like I said—been a rock. And of course are our

greatest rock has been in the Savior. I mean, he, our faith has—we haven't had to waver because he's led us each step of the way. The right people, the right circumstances, though, I mean, a long time getting there.

TH [10:04]: Absolutely. Sounds like it's been a long—what? We're coming up on the fifth year anniversary, is that right?

DL: Right.

TH: Yeah. Yeah. Looking back at it, how does it feel to be here now? Do you feel fairly recovered in your family?

DL: It's great to be on this side. I mean, it's [pause] looking back, it's sort of surreal. But they say, the saying is, "You got to have a little rain to have a rainbow." So that's what it's been.

TH: The rainbow.

DL: Yeah.

TH: Of course. Well, I'm just looking at my questions so I don't forget. [laughter] I'm just wondering if we can go a little bit back to after Florence. And if you could tell me a little bit, just for the record, about what exactly happened during that. And if you feel comfortable, and what adjustments you had to make in your everyday life, especially with your kids?

DL [11:14] Oh, sure. Well, we originally--we left to go to Oxford, and we made some really good friends during that time. We just came back from there. We stayed with them during my son's [] graduation. But we became friends with them weirdly: we'd met them briefly at a deaf camp for my daughter, and they had adopted 12 special needs kids. So, our families blended really well together; 4 of mine and 12 of theirs, and they all just become like brothers and sisters. And so, they called and said, "Hey, you know that hurricane's coming—will you come stay with us. And, well, then we proceeded to get stuck there, because the highways were so flooded. And then—that was like days into it. Then finally they kept checking, and they said, "Okay, roads are cleared." This was about eight or nine days later. And they said, "Well, you'll be in our thoughts and prayers. We don't know what you're going home to." Well, we got home. And from the outside, it didn't look quite so bad. It wasn't—I'm like, "Okay, it's gonna be all right." But when we walked in, the water had gotten in there, and it began settling. And I started having a hard time breathing.

TH [12:42]: The mold.

DL [12:43]: And my son started feeling funny. So we were immediately like, "Okay, I don't know what we're going to do. But we can't stay here." And my husband's like, "No. If it's already settling like that," he said, "and your breathing is like that." He said, "It's just not good." So we had to--initially his mother had a little place next door before, but she had went for a season to Texas to stay with his brother. So he's like, "Well, we'll try to stay over there for a while". And so we went over there, and we stayed there for a couple months into it, it was around Christmas. That storm had been in September around our anniversary. And so everything was fine until

that Christmas. We were there, and we had the Christmas tree and the dryer going at the same time, and it almost caught on fire with us in the house. And so, the Fire Department found out that it was because the circuits were so old, and he said that we were very fortunate that it didn't catch on fire with us there. So at that point, we—right around Christmas now—we picked a little reasonable place to Atlantic Beach to stay with the children. I think it was like a little condo, but they give us a good rate because they're like, "Well, it was right here at Christmas time." So we stayed there and then from there, we had to find other somewhere to rent. So, and everything went from there up to when we met and got to know Robbie a lot better. Everything led up from there. But it was it was a long process.

TH [14:35]: And during that time, where were your kids, your younger ones, going to school?

DL: They were—David had all his medical issues. So by this point, they had me homeschooling him because, God bless him, he was only I'm about to start high school that year. Matter of fact, he was supposed to start that Monday. We had been there a couple of weeks before, and he kept having blood pressure issues. And so the doctor said, "I don't think there's hardly any unlikely anything's wrong, but I'm gonna do some blood work." So they called, it was like that Saturday, we were all in the shop. He was supposed to go to East Carteret that Monday and start his high school here. So they called and said, "Honey, we got to have him rushed to Greenville. He's in kidney failure. That's why his blood pressure has been high. And he might not live the weekend if you don't get him here." So we were like, wide open to. So then we had my mother-in-law come down. My parents were living at the time. So between the two, they were like, "Okay, well, we're going to help with the kids while you're going." So they put David in the hospital, and they were all starting theirs next year at Smyrna Elementary. So Becca was, let's see, this was her eighth grade year. And then I think it was like, fourth and sixth. I mean, they were about two years apart. So it was a handful.

TH: Yeah.

DL: So we got David settled, I came home that Sunday night because I wanted to see them off to their first day of school. So came home for a little while, got everything set up with my parents, and then went back and stayed with him a couple of days and kept calling. So it was—they were getting a balancing act. So much going on at one time.

TH [16:51]: Yeah, absolutely, and it sounds like—they were staying with your parents for a bit? Or you were all staying with your parents? Ok.

DL: Yes, yeah.

TH: Yes. Yeah. So they were being able to get them to school and everything. Right. Because I know moving around—seems like it might be hard to get everyone in one place when you're just [pause] split in so many directions.

DL: Yeah, exactly.

TH: Yeah. Yeah, absolutely.

TH: Oh, well, I wanted to ask a little bit about just with Robbie and everything and, and how you got word of her and and how she helped you in this process a little bit?

DL [17:36]: Well, I know there for a while, right performance son got so sick, I had got into substitute teaching. So some of those girls had just briefly said when that came up, they were like—I think I went in to sub one time before everything happened between the storm and my son and his kidney problem. And I think they said, you know, “You need to plug into this recovery program.” And I say, “I don't know what you're talking about.” And they said, “Can we pass your number on?” And they said, “You know, because from what we know of you guys are a faithful family—faithful to your kids, and you've been a good sub.” I'm like, “Sure.” And so from there, I met Robbie, and so things pretty much went from there.

TH: Yeah. At that point, if you don't mind me asking, was there—was FEMA helping you at all? Or what kind of help did they provide?

DL [18:45]: No. They said we weren't eligible. What happened was, originally, we had hopes because they sent somebody out. And he said, “Well, that was an insurance issue, seems like you didn't have enough coverage, and maybe we should really reevaluate this.” Then they send us a letter and we got all hopeful when they said it's being reconsidered, and maybe there was more damage than we thought because they looked inside. But then I called them. It was like, two or three weeks. We hadn't heard anything. Then I called them and they said, “I'm sorry. It didn't deem that you—they felt that you needed help. They felt like it wasn't severe enough. They felt like maybe you should just start over—go rent somewhere, but they didn't deem you needing any help.”

TH: Even though your house wasn't livable?

DL: Right, right. Exactly.

TH: That's hard to believe [laughter].

DL: Yeah, yeah.

TH: Wow. Well, in terms of recovery is it your perception that a lot of people, you know, in Straits and Down East in general have dealt with a lot of the same issues with FEMA?

DL [20:21]: Oh, no doubt. I mean, my husband has a boss that their house was damaged, and you can see it from the outside. But FEMA actually told them, because it wasn't washed away totally, that they could restore it with their own hands, and they wasn't going to help them and that they felt he made too much money to get help. So it's been hard on his wife and how I know is because we go to church together. And so she's had a really hard time with that, because they're renting this little bitty place. And they're having a hard time getting to the place where they can rebuild, because it's phenomenal cost, and it would be so much to start over for them. So I know that's just one of many I've heard that they haven't got help like they should.

TH: Sounds like it really puts your life on pause.

DL: Right.

TH: Yeah, absolutely. Do you think now that do you feel fully recovered with your family? And if not, what kind of resources do you need? And what? What does full recovery look like for you and your family?

DL [21:44]: I think—I think we are. Now I think [pause] there's always going to be a little trauma scars there, so to speak. Because if we hear the word hurricane hits, like, “Ah, no, no, no, no, wait. We finally are on our feet. And they're still all these people trying to recover.” So that's the last word we want to hear. So I think that through the support of like the Long Term Recovery, church family, and our extended family, and our faith, I think we've recovered quite a bit.

TH: I and—your church, which, which church do you attend?

DL: Bridgeway Church of the Nazarene in Beaufort.

TH: Ok, great. Can you tell me about what they've done for you?

DL [22:49]: Well, initially, they started working—they did some fundraising for a while. They helped with like, gas, the gas was crazy with my son's medical. I mean, it was out of this world. We were—if it wasn't stay in there—and then you need a hotel—then we were traveling back and forth, and that gas prices was phenomenal. So they jumped in and helped do fundraising. And they helped us get settled in and tried to help with food and stuff when we were trying to get into the house. Then they gave us a housewarming. Now, ironically, fast forward three years, they have started a preschool. So I was working with Head Start, but to give back to our church and to the community, because there's no childcare, I'm one I'm their lead teacher for their three and four-year-olds. So I'm now sort of like paying forward what they did for me and my family.

TH: Wow, yeah.

DL: So and they also—my son just come back from Tampa, Florida. He was there with 5000 other kids, the Nazarene assemblies, and they did like days and days of church meetings. They went to SeaWorld, they went to Disney, and so they've just been a great support for our whole family.

TH: Wonderful. And did they continue to have services through, you know, 2018, 2019, and then through COVID as well?

DL: They, they took a few weeks off because it got rampant in our church, and they tried to continue, but there for why there was so many people sick he said, “Well, it's just better for us to go home for a while.” But once everybody got better, he reopened and everybody—they just had seats barred off where everybody had

space like they were supposed to. Everybody wore masks and they had sanitizers and they had wipes, and they just did the precautionary thing.

TH: Ok, I see. I wanted to ask you a little bit about Headstart. That's amazing that you're a teacher there. What is your role? Do you teach them—because I'm not familiar with the program--do you teach kids all the subjects or?

DL [25:35]: Well, I was with Head Start and yeah, I was teaching, basically, it was reading, initially writing, outside activities, water activities. We even had a couple of outings like to the park and different places, and initially, a lot of teacher training, a lot of workshops. But now I'm with Bridgeway, my church, the only difference is I still teach. But I'm also allowed to incorporate Christian principles, which the parents who bring them initially when I met them, they said—[coughs]. Excuse me. They said, “We love that you have a background of teaching, and we want our children to be taught education. But we also want them to be taught principles.” They said, “So that's why we chose this private sector.” So it gives me the leeway to do both—to educate and live my faith and inspire them in such a way.

TH: Wow, that sounds like a good combination. Yeah. And so how long have you been with Bridgeway? And how many kids are in your class usually?

DL: I've been with Bridgeway 10 years. And I have—this year, I'm going to have 10 four-year-olds. I got promoted from the three-year-old to the four-year-olds. I understand that 8 of them are boys [laughter]. So my director, I said, “Eight boys?” And she says, “You're good for it, kid, you raised three. I said, “Okay, but I mean, I'm sort of praying that the girls will even out when I get there” [laughter].

TH: You have your hands full.

DL: Right, right [laughter].

TH: Well, my mom is a teacher too. And she used to teach pre-K, so I know that that can be quite a job. The little ones. Always nonetheless.

DL: Right. Right. Yeah.

TH: I wanted to switch gears just a little bit since I didn't know you're from Harkers Island. I wanted to ask a little bit about—so part of the project is Florence but also environmental change too. And just there's so much going on Down East. And since you lived here for so long, I wanted to ask, what kinds of changes that you think you're seeing around and as far as maybe, you know, the environment but also development?

DL [28:35]: I mean, I think it's grown a lot. It's got its pros and cons. I think the pros is it grows our economy a lot. And people are—you're able to be a little bit more friendly and welcoming, and you meet a lot of people. But the cons is, when I was a young girl, you went to the post office, you knew everybody. I mean, everybody knew you by first name basis. And if you didn't know them it was real strange, so I think just having get used to that bigger community. That's about the worst cons that I can think.

TH: Yeah, and you said you were out on the water a lot as a girl too.

DL: Yes. My dad took me every weekend: went clamming, fishing, went to the banks, went to the Cape. I mean, and his dad was the one of the first official fishermen of a licensed fishermen of the island. That's how he made his slip and ride on until he retired.

TH: And what was his name?

DL: Johnny Lewis.

TH: And he's no longer with us, right?

DL: He died like in 1990, it was.

TH: And what was your mom's name?

DL [30:08]: My mom's name was Barbara Lewis. She died about four years back, and my daddy was Dennie Lewis, and he died two years back. They were both remarkable people. My dad was a U.S. Coast Guard and retired from Cherry Point, both combining 35 years of service. So and always loved this island—always loved everything about it.

TH: So were both your parents from Harkers Island?

DL: My mom was from Vanceboro.

TH: Oh she was from way off [laughter].

DL: Yeah. And she, ironically, would come down with her sister that was dating a man down here. That was my uncle. My uncle passed a couple years ago also. But, ironically, they came down together. So she was married to my uncle, and then my mom met my dad. And so they were neighbors right on until a few years back. Before my mom and dad passed, they had moved to have a smaller home because it was so hard to take care of.

TH: Yes, wow. But they loved Harkers Island.

DL: Yes, all of them. I mean, they never—they said it was the best place to be.

TH: What made it so special to them?

DL [31:40]: I think my—I know for my dad, he loved the water. I mean, he just [pause] and my mother, she said she loved her craft from Vanceboro. But once she moved out here that it was just in her blood, she just became an Islander. It was just one of those natural things.

TH: It's what Karen always says. It gets in your blood [laughter]. I'm learning the ways slowly.

DL: Right, right.

TH: Yeah, exactly. But growing up on the water, did your dad instill values around natural resources in you? Around fishing maybe?

DL [32:28]: Definitely. I mean, it's funny. I was a dressy girl, but I was like the dressy tomboy. I loved my shirt dresses on Sunday. But on Saturday, I wanted to be out on a clam hole digging clams because that was just something I had just had in my system. My daddy said, "Yeah, from the time you were five, I couldn't stop you. You just--" He said, "We'd go over to the banks, and I'm like, 'Where she at?'" And he said, "There I'd look and you're looking for clams" [laughter].

TH: Did you have a favorite spot?

DL: I did. Over by Shackleford, there was just this one place and it just seemed so rich with clams. I just loved to go there [laughter].

TH: Sounds wonderful. It's kind of free. Well, do you still go clamming at all?

DL: I do once in a while. I went last year with my kids and we couldn't—we found a few. But my husband's like, "Babe, if there was any, everybody loves them so good, you know they've been dug up by now." But it was fun to try. Yeah.

TH: Do you see any other kinds of like, changes with maybe if you go fishing or clamming that you're not seeing certain types of things here anymore?

DL [34:01]: Like I said, I think clams aren't as rich maybe because they're so much more popular than when I was a girl. Fish, even for the fisherman, I've heard you gotta catch the right season. I know some from here at the Harkers Island churches. I know some from Bridgeway. They say, "Yeah, you got to catch it the right season because it's basically feast or famine." So and even with crabs, when I was a girl you would see on the water if it got low tide. You could see them. You don't see that now. I don't know if that's environmental changes, storms, or just one of those things.

TH: Yeah, maybe too many storms. I don't know. Have you noticed the dead snags like between Davis and Stacy? And actually kind of all around? I don't know if I've seen any in Straits, I don't know.

DL: I've noticed a little bit. I used to go down a little bit more often. My mother was down in Sea Level Hospital a few years back, and I would notice things driving down and back. And but in recent years, I haven't noticed much. Yeah.

TH: Yeah, ok. I wanted to ask too, since you said your dad was a commercial fisherman--

DL: My grandfather.

TH: Oh, I'm so sorry.

DL: Oh, that's okay. Yeah, my father. He fished with him when he was young. He grew up under my granddaddy. And he later went on to the Coast Guard. And he said all those fishing skills, all those boating skills, all that paid off in the long run in the Coast Guard. It was something that it paid forward, because he was able to take it with him all that knowledge.

TH: Oh, I see, like knowledge of the ocean. Right, that makes sense! And I wanted to ask, do you remember the red tide of '87 by chance?

DL [36:26]: I do [laughter].

TH: You do? I was hoping [laughter].

DL: I was—Lord, I was young, I think I was 13 years old. But it was crazy. I remember for a while they made—after it had passed, they had bumper stickers, and they were they were making enormous amounts on those bumper stickers. We'd be riding into Morehead City, and my mom would be like, "There's another one of them stickers." I survived the red tide [laughter]. Then they went to T-shirts, so I'll never forget that my mom and dad would joke about "Boy, they make the most money off of that red tide" [laughter].

TH: Wow, that's funny. Do you remember what they were saying about it when it came in? Because I know it was the first of its kind and really the last of its kind, as far as I know.

DL [37:26]: Well, it affected our seafood because, I mean, we couldn't eat it because it wasn't safe. So it made that time period really hard, because people who were dependent or loved seafood, it just wasn't an option. So I do remember—even as young as I was--people talking about that.

TH: How old would you have been at the time?

DL: I think I was 12 going on 13.

TH: Oh, good memory. I don't know if I'd remember that far back [laughter]. Ok. I was talking to Tommy Salter the other day at Cedar Island. And he said, you know, because he used to fish and he remembers that and how it impacted scallops and the shellfish and all those different kinds of things. He said before they knew about it someone, like ate some and they and they felt tingles and decided to stop.

DL: I heard--I remember that too. One or two people got like a virus. I can't recall what they called it, but the local hospital was calling it something and it was some terminology for the effects of eating seafood affected by

that. So then they've started putting signs out, you know, at your own risk, don't eat this. So I do remember that even when I was with my dad on the boat, I recall seeing a sign that said if you—basically that you can clam and this and this, but if you do it's at your own risk. Later, they went on to find people because they started getting sick.

TH: So it sounds like people didn't always pay attention to the signs.

DL: Right [laughter].

TH: Were some more liable to pay attention than others [laughter]?

DL: Right, exactly.

TH: How funny. I wanted to just go back for a minute and ask you—I know I'm jumping all over the place—

DL: Oh, that's ok.

TH: But just ask about what can we do to honor people who have survived hurricanes and have just been so strong. What resources do you think we could give people to help them, even now?

TH [40:12]: I think the County has tried, but I think maybe a little bit more attention to counseling. I know, for me personally, for a while, I had my pastor counsel my husband and I and the children, because of all the aftereffects of going through the storm. And I think the extra little bit of push helps through traumatic things like that. And then, I think anybody that can jump on and help Robbie and them, because their load is phenomenal. And there's only so many of them. So I think if people could, it would just make the ones who have rose above it feel better that those people are more helped, because we know how much they pour into it.

TH: Absolutely. Okay, yeah, it's about time we'll wrap it up then. Just, overall, I suppose one more question or, well, two more questions. Just first being what, what are your hopes for Down East as far as the future, maybe 20 years in the future? What do you hope the community will look like?

DL [41:49]: I think it's just gonna grow, I want it to continue to carry the values and the family orientation, like the background has had, and if anything, if any new people decide to move in just incorporate those important family principles, because Harkers Island and the Down East community in general, has been through a lot storm-wise. But they've also showed the phenomenal strength and what happens when you pull together. And so, I think I hope that legacy carries on.

TH: Well, actually, I think that's it. So thank you so much for speaking with me today. Opening your heart to me. I really appreciate it.

DL: Oh, you're welcome. And it's been wonderful. Thank you for your time.

TH: Oh, thank you. I'll turn this off.